

National Marine Protected Areas Center

November 2004

Strategic Plan



INTRODUCTION

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have long been used as a management tool for conserving marine resources. The United States (U.S.) currently has hundreds of MPAs established by individual federal, state, tribal and local authorities for a wide range of purposes. Joint planning and interaction, however, is generally localized. Little analysis has been done to ensure that MPAs are designed and coordinated to effectively protect the nation's natural and cultural resources, and represent the diversity of U.S. marine ecosystems. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Protected Areas Center (MPA Center) was created to bring some order out of this chaos and facilitate the effective use of science, technology, training, and information in the planning, management and evaluation of the nation's system of MPAs.

Presidential Executive Order 13158 defines the term "MPA" as "any area of the marine environment that has been reserved by federal, state, territorial, tribal or local laws or regulations to provide lasting protection for part or all of the natural and cultural resources therein." Issued in May 2000, the Executive Order directs federal agencies to work together to ensure an effective national system of MPAs in the U.S. and to

accomplish a variety of related tasks working with public and private partners. The Executive Order also directed NOAA to establish the MPA Center to lead these activities in partnership with the Department of the Interior.

The MPA Center has three units. The MPA Center's headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, is responsible for program management, planning, consultation, coordination, outreach and education. Headquarters also has regional staff located in Boston, Massachusetts; Honolulu, Hawaii; and Monterey, California. The MPA Center's Science Institute, with offices in Santa Cruz and Monterey, California, fosters targeted research, assessment and policy analysis on aspects of design, management and evaluation of MPAs to bring sound science into the MPA policy arena. Finally, the MPA Center's Training and Technical Assistance Institute in Charleston, South Carolina, provides training, needs assessments, and technical support to MPA managers on stakeholder involvement, technology tools, management practices, and effectiveness evaluation. All units coordinate their functions and work nation-wide.

NATIONAL MPA CENTER VISION

An effective, science-based, and collaborative national system of marine protected areas conserving marine ecosystems and cultural resources throughout the U.S.

NATIONAL MPA CENTER MISSION

To facilitate the effective use of science, technology, training, and information in the planning, management, and evaluation of the nation's system of marine protected areas.

NATIONAL MPA CENTER GOALS

The Center has three goals. These are derived from the Executive Order and the NOAA Strategic Plan.

1. Develop a comprehensive plan for an effective and evolving National System of MPA sites and networks in the U.S. that meets multiple conservation and management needs for this and future generations.
2. Improve MPA stewardship and effectiveness.
3. Facilitate international, national and regional coordination of MPAs activities.

CROSS-CUTTING SUPPORT FUNCTIONS WITHIN THE NATIONAL MPA CENTER

The MPA Center provides critical support in key functional areas that cut across goals and link to other programs within NOAA, DOI and our other partners. Principal among these functional areas are:

Science and Analysis — targeted research and assessment of natural and social science issues affecting MPAs.

Policy Analysis — assessments of current and emerging issues affecting MPA policies at the national, regional, tribal, state, and territorial level.

Synthesis — objective summaries of complex science and policy issues in a form that is useful to agencies and stakeholders engaged in the MPA arena.

Technical Assistance — tools and technologies needed to design, plan, manage, and evaluate MPAs.

Training — specialized courses about MPA issues targeted to both practitioners and stakeholders.

MPA CENTER LINKS TO NOAA AND THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR

The National MPA Center is housed within NOAA and coordinates across NOAA programs, as well as with pertinent federal, state, territorial and tribal MPA and MPA-support programs. At the federal level the MPA Center works closely with the Department of the Interior (DOI), which manages many marine areas under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuges and National Park Service, as well as the Minerals Management Service, which is responsible for managing outer continental shelf leases for mineral, oil and gas exploration, and conducting supporting research.

The location of the MPA Center within NOAA allows it to draw on NOAA's resources and expertise in ocean, ecosystem and fisheries management — critical components of MPA coordination. The Center is part of NOAA's Coastal and Marine Resources Program, which supports NOAA's Ecosystem Goal, "to protect, restore and manage the use of coastal and ocean resources through ecosystem-based management."

Communication — objective information distributed using various mechanisms to diverse and comprehensive audiences that are involved in or impacted by MPA issues.

Education — information to teachers, students and targeted stakeholders to increase their understanding of MPA issues.

Regional and National Coordination — facilitating dialogues and partnerships at the national and regional levels to elicit, understand, and support MPA priorities

International Coordination — transferring U.S. and international experiences and ensuring linkages to and participation in international MPA efforts, including MPA systems and networks.

GOAL 1. DEVELOP THE PLAN FOR A NATIONAL SYSTEM OF MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

Currently, the U.S. lacks a cohesive and integrated national system of MPAs. Throughout U.S. waters, MPAs exist as a collection of individual sites, created by a myriad of agencies with diverse objectives, authorities, management approach, and capacities. While many of these sites do well to serve local needs and certain national programs, they do not constitute a comprehensive, systematic national MPA approach. The MPA Center is charged with developing an effective, science-based National System of MPAs (National System) that will enhance the management of existing MPAs and recommend new MPAs, as appropriate.

The National System will include a variety of MPA sites representing diverse U.S. marine ecosystems and the Nation's natural and cultural resources. Establishment and management of existing and new MPAs will continue to rest in the hands of the diverse federal, state, territorial, tribal, and local governments that have been given the authority to do so. Through the National System, however, these sites will benefit from being linked to a comprehensively planned ecosystem framework through improved information, communication, management tools, and regional networks.

Objective 1. Provide a set of straightforward and objective terms to describe the variety of MPA types and uses in the U.S.

The national dialogue about whether, when, and how to use MPAs to conserve and manage key marine resources and habitats has been severely hindered by the lack of consistent terminology to describe the variety of MPAs in the U.S. In response, the MPA Center, with input from the MPA

Federal Advisory Committee (MPA FAC), agencies, and stakeholders, has undertaken several efforts to facilitate the collective understanding of MPAs and other types of place-based management. First, the MPA Center has developed a new Classification System for MPAs that uses six objective and straightforward aspects of any site to describe its purpose, level of protection, and likely impacts on ecosystems and human users. Second, through a public process, functional criteria are being developed for the widely used but poorly understood

term “marine protected area” and the broader term of “marine managed area.” This ‘common language’ for MPAs will inform and enable a more meaningful and constructive examination of this promising tool for ecosystem management in the U.S. Together, the criteria and Classification System provide key elements of the planning framework for the National System.

Objective 2. Inventory MMAs and assess existing capabilities.

Although the U.S. has long used MPAs to conserve and manage the most important and treasured ocean resources, the Nation still lacks a rigorous understanding of the number and nature of existing MPAs in U.S. waters. To address this, the MPA Center is developing a comprehensive Inventory of Marine Managed Areas (MMAs) in U.S. waters, working closely with federal, state, territorial, and tribal agencies to acquire and verify data on key aspects of each site. When completed, this unprecedented compilation of information on place-based marine management in the U.S. provides information on the location, purpose, management approach, resources protected, and potential effects of existing MMAs of various types. The MMA Inventory and subsequent analyses derived from it will be made available to the public on www.MPA.gov and through other MPA Center publications.

Objective 3. Develop the National System Framework.

The MPA Center will produce a National System Framework document that describes: (i) the origin, need and purpose for a national system of MPAs in the U.S.; (ii) goals for the national system; (iii) MPA types and criteria; (iv) the scope of local, regional and national planning processes envisioned to identify priority areas for future place-based conservation; and (v) options for long-term stewardship and governance of its component MPA sites and programs. In developing

the Framework the MPA Center will seek and consider extensive input from the MPA FAC; federal, regional, state, and territorial marine management programs and agencies; specific user groups; and the wider stakeholder public through a series of workshops, regional listening sessions, and ongoing dialogues.

Objective 4. Develop the Existing National System and List of MPAs

Executive Order 13158 directs NOAA and DOI, in consultation with other federal agencies to develop the National System and create and maintain a List of MPAs (MPA List) that meet the goals and criteria developed and finalized in the Framework. To develop the existing National System and MPA List, the goals and MPA criteria in the Framework will be applied to the sites listed in the growing MMA Inventory to identify those that are eligible for inclusion in the National System of MPAs. NOAA and DOI will then work with the federal, state, and tribal agencies that have MPA programs with authority over eligible sites in order to develop the initial National System and MPA List from this nucleus.

The MPA List, which will grow as newly established sites that meet the criteria are added, will also provide critically needed data to assist federal agencies in avoiding harm to the natural and cultural resources within listed sites, as required under the Executive Order. Working closely with other federal agencies, the MPA FAC, and interested parties, the MPA Center will apply sound science and policy analysis to develop practical guidelines for Federal agencies to help them protect the resources of the National System and the human uses, ecological services and societal values for which they were originally protected.

Objective 5. Identify regional and national opportunities, gaps and priorities for place-based conservation.

Using the Framework and the criteria as guidelines, the MPA Center will facilitate and support an ambitious and collaborative conservation planning process to identify and design the fundamental components of the National System of MPAs. This effort will identify habitats and resources important for natural heritage, cultural heritage and sustainable production within U.S. regions that may be in need of additional protec-

tion either through improving the effectiveness of existing MPAs or establishing new sites.

Key components of this multi-year process include: (i) the development and maintenance of dialogues and partnerships with key agencies, academic institutions, and diverse stakeholders in U.S. regions; (ii) a synthesis of the purposes, types, resources protected, and levels of protection afforded by the existing National System of MPAs and all other relevant marine management efforts, relying heavily on the Inventory and MPA Classification System; (iii) an assessment of the existing legal and policy framework for MPAs in the U.S.; (iv) an assessment of contributions of the existing National System of MPAs to the overall goals of the National System; (v) national and regional synthesis of information on the distribution and status of key resources and habitats in U.S. marine ecosystems; (vi) an assessment of the patterns and potential impacts of human uses in marine ecosystems; (vii) an assessment of gaps in protection for important marine areas; and (viii) recommended priority areas for consideration in future MPA planning, including areas for inclusion in the national system. These regional planning efforts will rely heavily on consistent, meaningful engagement of and input by diverse stakeholder interests, including the MPA FAC.

Objective 6. Develop the Integrated Plan for a comprehensive and effective national system of MPAs.

The regional MPA planning process outlined above will result in priority conservation areas for three distinct purposes and types of place-based management in the U.S.: natural heritage, cultural heritage and sustainable production. To identify linkages across these thematic areas and encourage, where appropriate, multiple conservation benefits within a single site or network of sites, the National MPA Center and its partners in NOAA Fisheries and elsewhere will develop integrated MPA design criteria. When combined with a suite of user-friendly decision support tools, these integrated criteria will facilitate a collaborative process within regions to identify a comprehensive suite of MPAs that meet multiple regional objectives with the

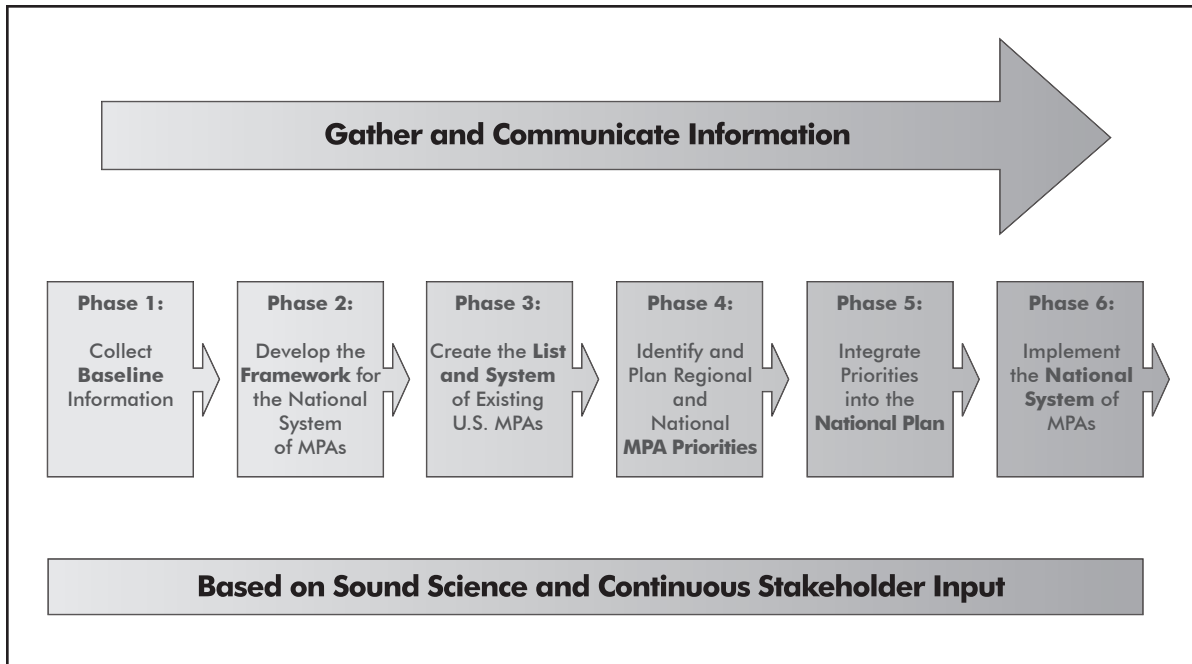


Figure 1: Process for developing the National System of MPAs.

fewest impacts to coastal users. The resulting Integrated Plan for a National System of MPAs in the United States will inform decisions by independent MPA authorities about whether, when, and how to use this tool to protect some of the nation's most valued resources.

Performance measure:

By 2010, complete 100% of the natural and cultural resource characterizations for U.S. biogeographic regions.

goal 1

GOAL 2. IMPROVE MPA STEWARDSHIP AND EFFECTIVENESS

Section 1 of Executive Order 13158 calls for strengthening the management, protection and conservation of existing marine protected areas. The MPA Center aims to enhance MPA stewardship by strengthening capacity for planning, management, and evaluation within the MPA community. Creating and implementing effective management strategies requires the awareness, understanding, and application of relevant best practices by management and affected stakeholder groups. The MPA Center targets governmental agencies with MPA management authority at the tribal, territorial, state, regional, and national level. It also reaches out to those affected by MPA management decisions to provide an awareness of opportunities and the skills necessary for substantive involvement in decision-making.

Objective 1. Foster awareness and understanding of the national system of MPAs and MPA management.

It is essential that the MPA Center maintain consistent communication with both the public and management entities to provide basic information about MPAs and MPA processes, as well as updates on Executive Order implementation. Through the MPA.gov website, informational workshops, a monthly newsletter, and other communication mechanisms, the MPA Center conducts outreach to a wide range of stakeholders, including the general public. In order to ensure the most effective delivery of outreach material, the MPA Center regularly assesses its constituents and updates the scope of distribution efforts. Wherever possible the MPA Center will continue to take advantage of existing education networks to share information and use a variety of communication mechanisms to conduct targeted outreach to government agencies, including states and tribes. A key focus of communication and outreach efforts will continue to include fostering awareness and understanding of the National System of MPAs as it develops and evolves.

Objective 2. Support increased use of science and technology in decision making.

An important role of the MPA Center is to facilitate the development and application of natural and social

science information and tools for sound decision-making in MPA design, management, and evaluation. As a first step the Center is identifying priority natural and social science needs, gathering input from MPA managers and staff, scientists from a range of disciplines, and stakeholders. The Center is also helping managers acquire needed science information, providing tools and assistance for the collection of social and natural science data, and building partnerships that will foster data sharing. Once data are collected, additional analysis is often necessary to apply information to decision-making; the Center is providing training on technologies such as Geographic Information Systems and developing decision-support tools to facilitate this application. In addition to providing direct training and assistance, the MPA Center also serves as a referral service, connecting members of the MPA community with existing resources available from other governmental and non-governmental sources.

Objective 3. Increase the capacity for meaningful, collaborative stakeholder participation in MPA processes.

Both MPA managers and a range of stakeholders have expressed a desire for more extensive and meaningful stakeholder participation in MPA processes. In addition to having an inherent right to participate in the management of public resources, stakeholders also bring useful knowledge about the natural and cultural marine environment. Meaningful participation leads to decisions that are responsive to community interests and values, and also can help resolve user conflicts, build trust, and educate the public about marine resource issues. Finally, research suggests that participation leads to increased compliance with any resulting regulations. The MPA Center is working to build the capacity of managers to plan and implement effective participatory processes. As a first step the Center is documenting and sharing lessons learned from recent participatory processes. Looking forward, the MPA Center hopes to provide information, training, and assistance as new processes are initiated.

Objective 4. Foster the creation and application of tools and strategies to improve MPA compliance and enforcement.

Compliance and enforcement present both challenges and opportunities to the planning and management of MPAs and MPA networks. The MPA Center is working with its partners to document and understand these challenges and opportunities, and to identify creative ways to address them. The primary role of the MPA Center in this context is to facilitate the exchange of information on issues and best practices among and between parties responsible for MPA compliance and enforcement. The MPA Center can also contribute by providing information and training about planning and management practices that enhance compliance and enforcement, and by facilitating the use of best technologies such as digital boundaries.

Objective 5. Build the capacity of the MPA community to evaluate MPA effectiveness.

Monitoring management effectiveness and conducting informed program evaluations are integral to the long-term success of MPAs. Managers are grappling with the development of meaningful, practical performance measures and outcome indicators that will both facilitate adaptive management and provide accountability to stakeholders. The MPA Center is working to build the capacity of the MPA community to evaluate the efficacy of management actions and progress toward MPA goals. In addition to enhancing awareness of MPA effectiveness evaluation methods and benefits, the Center will provide training and technical assistance to facilitate the use of measurable goals and objectives and performance measures for MPAs.

Performance measure:

By 2010, 30% of MPA sites will have improved their management capability due to the MPA Center's training and technical assistance, enhancing their ability to conserve the nation's natural and cultural marine heritage.

GOAL 3. FACILITATE INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND REGIONAL COORDINATION OF MPA ACTIVITIES

Coordination of international, national, and regional MPA activities is critical to achieving the goals that will be identified for the National System of MPAs, as well as to ensuring the effective stewardship of existing MPA sites. MPA coordination includes enhancing communication among diverse MPA sites and agencies, as well as identifying areas for inter-agency and inter-governmental cooperation and partnerships. Another key initiative will be working across all levels of government to identify and implement governance and coordination mechanisms to support an effective National System of MPAs.

Objective 1. Coordinate among federal, state, tribal and local agencies to support MPA national system and stewardship goals.

A key responsibility of the MPA Center is to coordinate with federal agencies and state, territorial and tribal governments on MPA activities. NOAA and DOI, through the Center, work jointly to implement the conservation objectives outlined in Executive Order 13158. Over the next few years, the Center will consult with federal agencies and state, territorial, and tribal governments on the design of the National System of MPAs. Another key activity will be working with federal agencies to develop a process for ensuring that MPAs in the National System are not harmed by federal actions.

The MPA Center is also responsible for the administration of the MPA FAC, which includes representatives from nongovernmental organizations, industry, and state, territorial, and tribal governments. The MPA FAC, established pursuant to the Executive Order, provides key recommendations to NOAA and the Department of the Interior on a wide range of issues relating to the National System of MPAs, stewardship and effectiveness, and intergovernmental coordination.

Objective 2. Foster regional coordination of agencies and stakeholders to support the National System of MPAs and stewardship goals.

MPA management is place-based ecosystem management. Regional coordination offers an important opportunity to link management efforts at individual sites into a larger,

more effective network to address issues of regional importance. In addition to its work at the national level, the MPA Center works at the regional level with states, territories, and tribes responsible for MPA designation and management. The MPA Center is building regional coordination capacity to link MPAs at the regional level, identify opportunities for collaboration, strengthen natural and social science to support regional MPA management efforts, and support the development of the National System.

In any region, the MPA Center will be able to characterize its involvement by one of the following three stages: communication, engagement, and integration. These three stages describe a continuum of involvement from:

- o the most basic levels of clear, consistent communication on local, regional and national issues among and across partners at those levels;
- o the engagement with those partners on these issues; and
- o the integration of MPA Center staff in local and regional activities in support of joint efforts at multiple levels.

With many different agencies involved in area-based management processes, their ultimate success will depend largely upon strategic coordination among agencies and meaningful engagement in MPA planning by stakeholders. To increase stakeholder access to information about these processes, the MPA Center is developing web-based Regional Information Centers to provide up-to-date information about MPA-related governmental processes.

Objective 3. Improve linkages with international MPA programs.

MPAs are a tool used globally to conserve natural and cultural marine heritage resources. The MPA Center works closely with both NOAA's Office of International Affairs and the National Ocean

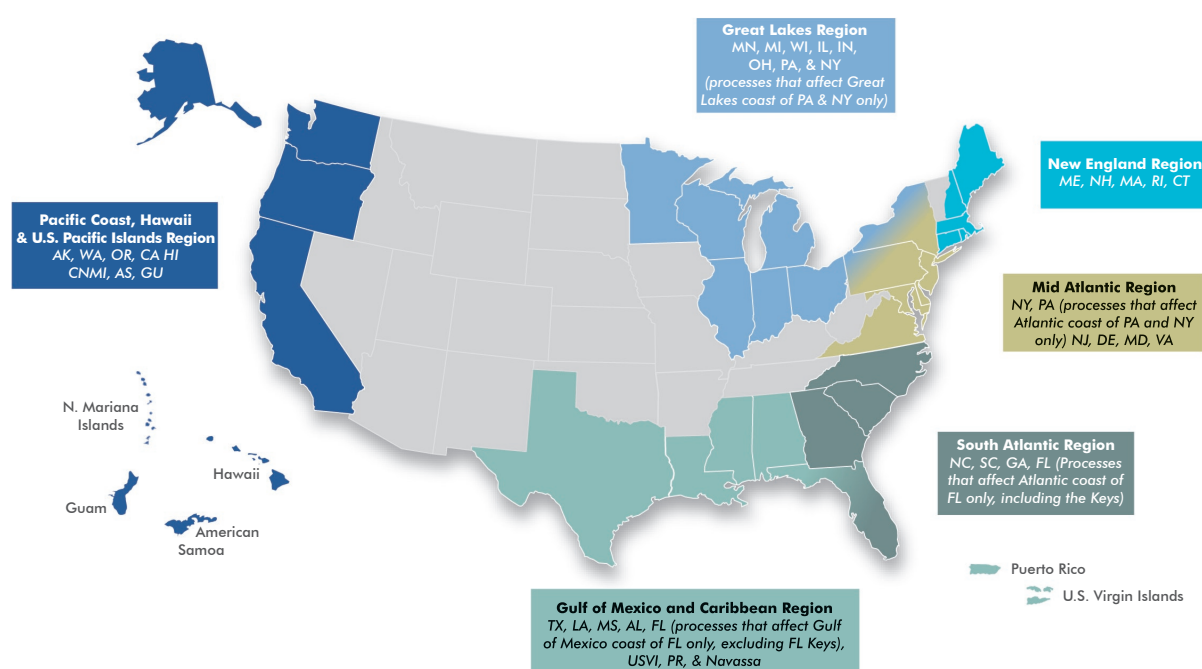
Service's International Programs Office to support technical assistance to other nations on MPA issues, collaborate with other nations on shared conservation goals, learn from other nations that are working to improve MPA effectiveness and develop national systems and MPA networks, and integrate elements of the developing U.S. National System with those of other nations. Key priorities for international activities are those that include partner nations with resources that share U.S. waters; support U.S. treaties, interests, or

other legal obligations; and advance management, educational, technical or scientific knowledge or practices.

Performance Measure:

By 2010, six regionally based coordination and support structures will link MPAs within the National System and the local level to ecosystem-based management initiatives.

MPA Center Functional Regions



The Future

The MPA Center recognizes that development, support, and implementation of a National System of MPAs is a dynamic process requiring adaptive management. As the System moves from its conceptual to implementation stage, this plan also will adapt/evolve in recognition of accomplishments and future requirements. Future changes anticipated at this time include: an eventual change in Goal One from National System development planning to one of National System implementation and System "completion," as well as monitoring of the status and effectiveness of the National System; an increased emphasis on providing stewardship and effectiveness improvement support; and continued, but refocused coordination and consultation on System implementation and improvement.